

TORONTO  
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# VIEWS

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*Celebration of Democracy, Guatemala City, 1987, (original in colour) from Nostalgia for an Unknown Land by Rafael Goldchain at Gallery TPW, January 28 - March 11.*

# Nostalgia for an Unknown Land:

## Rafael Goldchain's Colour Photographs

by Don Snyder



*Interior of Maskmaker's House, Chichicastenango, Guatemala, 1986, (original in colour) by Rafael Goldchain*

Rafael Goldchain was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1953. He later moved to Israel and studied physics and mathematics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the early 1970s before coming to Canada in 1976. He studied photography at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto from 1976 to 1980, and in the years since has established himself as a prolific and active member of the Canadian photographic community. His work has been published in *Image Nation*, *Foto Zoom* (Mexico), *The Malahat Review* and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, among other periodicals; and he has exhibited widely in Canada, Mexico and the United States. His work has been included in group shows at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Presentation House Gallery in Vancouver, and the Month of Photography exhibitions in Mérida, Yucatán. Particularly notable are two 1988 exhibitions: *Recent Acquisitions* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a fall exhibition at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, where Goldchain was one of the winners of the first Leopold Godowsky Jr. Color Photography Awards competition. In 1989, Goldchain has a solo exhibition scheduled at the Art Gallery of Windsor and a limited-edition book is planned by Lumiere Press of Toronto, to be released in conjunction with the Windsor show. Goldchain was active in organizing the Canada/Mexico Exchange exhibition, which brought the work of Mexican photographers to Toronto, Saskatoon and Winnipeg, and showed images by Canadian photographers in Mexico City. Goldchain's distinctive style has won him recognition from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council, and his work is represented in public and private collections in North America, Mexico and Europe.

he returned from Mexico and Central America in 1987, "the visual elements and the title came together" as he was working to prepare an exhibition. Further discussion about his work and its implications revealed that the show's title is also partly autobiographical, and that it has complex meanings. Goldchain grew up in a small community with westernized values in the larger environment of a Latin American city, and he points out that "what was really Latin American was outside – I knew of the existence of other and harsher realities, but I was not in direct contact with them. I'm now trying to get this contact in my work, sometimes in a shy and uncertain way.... I use the photographic language of the traditional studio pose – the figure in front of a painted backdrop – and this lends a nostalgic quality. Also, the 'land' that is the sum total of the photographs is unknown, but it's in the process of being discovered – by myself, and by the viewer as he sees the work. I'm looking for a way to find and make images that combine fictionalization (the painted background) with narration (the real figures and events in the photographs) and that visually encapsulate a reality. This way I can tell a story – the painted information and the action or actors in front of it somehow work together – and the story will have, in specific instances, a resonance of cultural and political facts.

"Another way to put this," Goldchain continues, "is to say that the photographs make discrete statements that comment on certain realities, which can be ironic, tender, sweet or a mixture. What lies in between is the idea of fictionalization; and as the body of work grows, it creates a new reality, which is unknown previous to its creation. As I make photographs, the composite statement – as a territory of the mind – grows... so this is discovery of an unknown land and self, and a psychological drive towards knowing, getting to know, and contact with my own roots.

"I want to go somewhere, make discoveries, and bring them back," Goldchain says. "My search, or quest, is spiritual and aesthetic, and not really political. I do have certain political positions – very clear ones, this is unavoidable – but I'm not directly addressing my work to this although it does come out if you know where to look. The political issue is one aspect, but not the main one in terms of the readings available in the work. I'm trying to avoid the monolithic, hit-you-on-the-head statement that dies after the first viewing. If you look at the images of soldiers, or the young man with a back wound, there are more readings than just 'children are hurt by war' or 'men are hurt by war.' There is more to it than that. And a lot of what happens happens by default, because of the way things are. Things happen in the pictures by virtue of the fact that they were there to be seen – I didn't figure them out. If you look at the wounded soldier in front of the helicopter, you don't necessarily see him only as the soldier of an oppressive regime – the colour scheme of the image is cool except for his hands and face, which are warm. I'm not there for journalistic reasons, I'm not event-driven, and I'm working in colour, so the colour means something, too – and you see the images in a different way."

...continued on p.12

Goldchain explained his choice of *Nostalgia for an Unknown Land* as the title for this exhibition quite simply: he said that when

*Nostalgia for an Unknown Land* by Rafael Goldchain  
at Gallery TPW, January 28 - March 11.

# Third Successful Season: Ryerson/Kodak Lecture Series

by David Hlynsky, with Judy Whalen

What is the proper balance between technical instruction and the teaching of the philosophical issues of a professional practice? This question has plagued educators in all disciplines and continues to be the most important issue of contemporary training in communications studies and the arts. This debate is perhaps felt most strongly in the disciplines concerned with the photographic image: photography, film, video, journalism and advertising. These are all highly technical professions and a study of rapidly changing equipment, materials, processes and styles could easily fill all of the student-teacher dialogue and still leave the graduate ill-prepared to enter the fiercely competitive real world.

But just as the techniques of photography in advertising, journalism and art have produced media of greater sophistication, they have also produced media with greater seductive and communicative potential. The photographic image is one of the primary carriers of moral, ethical and philosophical messages in contemporary society and it's unlikely that this power will wane in the foreseeable future. By extension, photographers, publishers, editors and producers are the conscious (and unconscious) facilitators of popular philosophical discourse. There should be no question that the ethics of photographic communication are as important as its techniques. But what is the most efficient use of a student's time? How can educators most quickly inspire the student with photography's ethereal power and grace? How can educators instill students with a sense of moral and ethical responsibility for the cultural messages conveyed in their technically sophisticated images?

For the past three years, the highly inspired photography and film faculty of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute has engaged the generous sponsorship of Kodak Canada in the presentation of an annual lecture series entitled the Kodak Chair Lecture Series. Since November of 1986, thirty artists, photographers and filmmakers of international renown have been invited to deliver lectures and workshops on their respective professional practices. These presentations have covered a broad range of aesthetic and philosophical values and illustrated highly individual approaches to technique and style. Our community has been enriched by such important and varied thinkers as Hiro, Stan Brakhage, Norman Jewison, Evrogen,

Tom Sherman and Darryl Lynn. A recent presentation by Mary Ellen Mark was so popular that eighty people were unable to find seats. She generously offered to make the presentation a second time for those still stranded in the lobby. Her patience and commitment were greatly appreciated.

But attendance numbers alone cannot fully document the validity of this important series. These face to face meetings between students and professionals have incalculable ripple effects as the important seeds of both technical and philosophical thought grow and mature in the minds of the audience over the years to come. Here are the opportunities for students to experience the personal energy of people who might otherwise remain mythical; to hear anecdotal details behind the making of great works. Celebrities have faces and it's important for students to see the humanity behind the success. Here is the forum in which great artists confess their lucky accidents, illuminate the course of their inspirations and defend the moral position represented by their work.

The interactive workshops and guest critiques that accompany this series have provided the chance for students to confront difficulties and often lead them to recognize philosophical alternatives and technical short cuts.

The value of these lectures can perhaps be best measured by the large percentage of post graduates and non-students in the audience. Successful working professionals are exposed to networks outside of their own sphere of practice and the subtleties of photographic communications which are often too ephemeral or too difficult to express in technical literature alone.

Bob Surley, a working professional photographer in Toronto and a frequent member of the audience in the Kodak Chair Lecture Series recently expressed another value of the series... that of reinforcing artistic drive. "When you see people working away and, in the case of many of them, not making very much money but continuing to work, it's inspiring. It makes you think that you can do it too. That in itself is worthwhile."

There is no doubt that the Kodak Chair Lecture Series has been vital and successful. Kodak Canada must be congratulated for its support of this program and for its trust in the inspiration of Phil

Bergerson and Don Snyder of The Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. Together they have accomplished a balanced program of education, which will enable their students and community to better embrace the highest values of photographic communication. Gadgets and chemicals are important only if there are inspired minds to give them purpose. Three cheers for a worthwhile job well done.

## UPCOMING KODAK CHAIR LECTURES

**Susan Meiselas - February 10**

With the publication of her influential book *Nicaragua*, Susan Meiselas immediately established herself as one of the major figures in what has come to be known as the new colour photojournalism.

**Olivia Parker - March 10**

One of the foremost contemporary photographers working with still life and constructed imagery.

Learning Resources Centre, Room L72, Main Floor, 50 Gould Street. 7:30 p.m. Admission is free.

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## *Nostalgia... continued from p.8*

The work in this exhibition is nostalgic, in the sense of references to Goldchain's own past and to a photographic tradition of posing people in front of painted backdrops; and the land it shows is unknown, in the sense that Goldchain is involved in an ongoing process of discovery in which he and the viewer can share. The brilliance of Goldchain's colour, the cultural and political undercurrents in the work and Goldchain's use of the camera's ability to render detail and isolate the moment all combine to give these photographs an element of real virtuosity. There is much here to be seen, and while the implications may be complex, the seeing is clear, direct and specifically photographic. Writing about his work in 1987, Goldchain summarized his photographs this way: "Above all, they... depict a world that belongs in that hybrid realm of the imaginary and the real, which only photography can conjure."

An article by Alberto Manguel on the exhibition is in the Fall 1988 issue of *Blackflash*, published by The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon.